

Conversation Hour

Outcomes, Accountability, and Young Children With Disabilities: Where Are We?

Chair: Kathleen M. Hebbeler

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Barton: With increasing emphasis on accountability, there has been a demand for documenting child outcomes from Head Start through the K-12 system. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has felt this pressure as well. It faces demands for information on child outcomes for children with disabilities who are participating in early intervention and special education programs.

In response to this pressure, OSEP funded the Early Childhood Outcomes (ECO) Center. Its mission was to promote the development and implementation of childhood and family outcome measures for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities that can be used in national and state accountability systems. The ECO Center is headed by Kathleen Hebbeler, and involves six institutions throughout the nation. Early in the process, the Center engaged in a national stakeholder involvement process to identify three functional outcomes to be measured: (a) positive social-emotional skills; (b) acquisition and use of knowledge and skills, including language and literacy; and (c) appropriate action taken by children to meet their needs.

States were given discretion in terms of how to measure these outcomes but they needed to provide data within a certain period of time. They were also required to report information based on the following categories: (a) percentage of children who have maintained functioning at a level comparable to same-age peers, (b) percentage of children who improve their functioning to a level that achieves the level of same-age peers, (c) percentage of children who improve their functioning but not quite sufficient to achieve the level of same-age peers, and (d) percentage of children who do not improve their functioning throughout the duration of the program.

The ECO Center has been developing and providing guidance on the Child Outcomes Summary Form (COSF); which has a 7-point rating scale. It is not an assessment tool in itself but rather is a vehicle for summarizing data from multiple sources and providing some aggregation across states and at the national level.

Rous: Two events in 1998 in Kentucky propelled the state's accountability initiatives. The first was early childhood reform initiated by the Governor's office, where a 20-year plan was developed to investigate how outcomes for young children from birth to 5 can be improved. The second was a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to investigate the inclusion of preschool children in state-based accountability systems.

Starting in 2000, Kentucky began developing accountability indicators in four areas to determine whether children were making progress in birth-to-5 programs. A state-wide professional development framework was developed to describe personnel competencies and

standards for all birth-to-5 programs. This framework serves as the basis for both pre- and in-service training by aligning its early childhood standards and assessment systems with core training course content.

There are also environmental standards, which are used for determining quality ratings. These standards have been developed for use with all children, all programs in the state, and all ability levels; they are not age specific because the aim was to design more universal benchmarks.

A continuous assessment system was developed, which is available for all programs in the state and all children from birth to 5. The assessment system provides guidance on three levels of the continuous assessment process. The first level in this process is screening. A number of screening instruments covering all domains have been approved and recommended by the state. In the future, all early childhood programs in the state will be expected to do some level of screening.

The second level in the assessment process is diagnosis. This entails use of more standardized assessments. Again, a list of approved and recommended diagnostic assessments are available, which should be used to determine children's eligibility for risk programs, such as those addressing special needs or mental health concerns.

The last level in the process is called classroom instructional. There are 12 recommended assessment tools that cover children from birth to 5. They are curriculum-based assessments and are being used to measure whether children are meeting the standards and whether they are meeting the OSEP outcomes. All of the tools have been aligned with both the standards and the OSEP outcomes for measurement.

A data system is also in the process of being developed. This system allows programs to conduct a classroom instructional assessment and enter the information into either a web-based system or another type of system. It allows data to be captured in order to determine how well children are meeting the OSEP outcomes.

Hebbeler: The federal government requires data to be reported for all young children with disabilities who are participating either in early intervention or Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). Kentucky and Colorado have embedded this requirement into a broader system of measuring outcomes for all young children. Colorado's Child and Family Outcomes System, called Results Matter, is used for all children, including children with disabilities.

Based on its value statement about assessment, individual programs in Colorado must select and implement one of four approved assessments. This assessment system produces data about children with disabilities for OSEP, but the emphasis is on the importance of assessment for local programming. Information on how young children are doing is useful for providers and teachers, as well as the state and the federal government.

The Results Matter assessment system is still under development but one important aspect to note is that it is not simply concerned with child outcomes. Family outcomes are also investigated. In addition, the system monitors program quality and there is a service component. Finally, a longitudinal study is being designed that will allow long-term outcomes to be tracked for children participating in the early childhood system.

A professional development plan has been constructed to train providers and teachers to fully participate in this accountability system. A number of modules are being developed and a train-the-trainer model used for dissemination. Decisions regarding module content and length are ongoing.

Discussion and Audience Comments: A participant wondered how useful the three OSEP outcomes were to providers on a daily basis. A panel member responded that the child outcomes were intentionally written so that different states' various assessment tools could map onto these outcomes. Consequently, the outcomes themselves are probably not terribly useful on a day-to-day basis for program planning. A more detailed assessment tool would be needed for these purposes.

States can use the COSF in one of two ways. Many states use the COSF in a team-rating process, discussing the assessment information available for each child then reaching a consensus about the child's level of functioning on the rating scale. Other states are not embedding the COSF in a team-rating process. They are comfortable with the instruments and feel that the assessment tools already incorporate conversations with parents, observations of providers, and so on. Providers input the data on the specific assessment tool into the system, and the publisher converts the pattern of responses within the data into a form that generates 7 points. States can use the 7-point summary to gain insight into children's outcomes.

Data from the COSF are scheduled to be reported for the first time in February 2007. Thereafter, data will be released every February.